So How Are We Doing: Effective Self-Evaluation Practices

Sunday, September 21, 5:00-6:00 (Ballroom IV)

The Case of the Entrepreneurial President

Jack Armstrong has been president at Golden University for a decade and during that time has turned the institution around on nearly every front. Enrollments grew, state funding for special projects and buildings gave the campus a new look, the annual fundraising campaign reached new levels, and the football team regularly wins the conference championship. He is well liked in the community. Armstrong and his wife are seen as social stars who stand out as community leaders yet maintain a down-to-earth quality at the same time.

Not surprisingly, Armstrong and his board share a very positive view of the future and each other. The president's annual evaluation sessions consist largely of Jack's reporting on the year's accomplishments and the board voting to increase his salary.

When first hired, Armstrong was one of the youngest presidents in the state. Initially, he and board members communicated almost weekly on issues facing the university. During the middle years of his tenure as the board's confidence in his abilities grew, the communication outside of board meetings diminished somewhat. During this period, Jack relied more on e-mails and newsletters with individual board members, although he stayed in close touch with his board chair who had become a close friend.

As positive as the situation at Golden is, the board chair is beginning to feel uneasy about some of the president's initiatives and the relationship between this bright executive and the trustees as a whole. On a quiet afternoon, he spent some time in his study itemizing what he thought might be early warning signs of problems to come. His list went like this:

- A fellow board chair from another state called to say that Armstrong was thought to be "available" in the job market. Armstrong had never mentioned any plans about leaving to his chair.
- Armstrong had developed plans for a new science and technology center while deferring an addition to the library. The board approved this decision. An old faculty friend of the chair said this was disturbing to many faculty who felt left out of the decision process. Some had talked about a "no confidence" vote as a way of getting the president's attention, although the chair's friend thought this unlikely to occur.
- It seemed to the chair that Armstrong had been traveling out-of-state frequently of late. Some of this travel was paid by the Foundation and some from university funds. The chair had no way of knowing how much the travel cost, how often the president was away, or even the specific purpose of the trips.

Questions for Discussion:

1. In the short run, what should the chair do to ease his concerns?

2. What flaws in board policy or practice are illustrated in this case?

3. What other lessons does this case offer to trustees?